

...market

by Jesse Ashlock

Wake-Up Call

Tips for making and selling a student project—as offered by Clocky's inventor

Gauri Nanda is, by her own admission, a chronic oversleeper. So for an industrial design class at the MIT Media Lab in fall 2004, she devised a robotic alarm clock that would run away and hide after it went off. Though Clocky, as she named her invention, was just an assignment, a blogger trolling the course website wrote about it a few months later, and suddenly every press outlet from Gizmodo to Good Morning America came knocking. But Clocky was still a raw prototype, and Nanda still a student, so she was faced with learning the ins and outs of product design on the fly. Nearly two years later, with Clocky selling briskly through her new company, Nanda Home, the designer reflects on what she has learned.

Talk to people.

Everything was new to me, even the steps in the prototyping phase, so I met with and got advice from product developers and entrepreneurs in Boston, where I live, who had done similar things from the ground up. One of the decisions I had to make in the very beginning was whether I was going to do this on my own or partner with someone and license Clocky to them, giving up my control in exchange for royalties. I explored the idea of co-branding Clocky with a retailer or a robotics company, but I had trouble finding a mutually beneficial agreement—definitely be wary of people who tell you they'll let you have creative input but end up taking your idea over. I would suggest applying for free legal counsel, which I got through a firm offering start-up entrepreneurs free services. In the end, after gathering feedback from people who used to work at iRobot and had left to start their own company, I learned that doing it on my own would teach

me the process and help me build a brand. They gave me the confidence to go forward.

Keep a close eye on manufacturing.

Some people use a broker to source and oversee their manufacturing efforts, while others travel overseas to be on-site during development and production. After I found a manufacturer in China I liked, I initially came back to the U.S. and let things go on without me, communicating as much as I could over the phone and through email. But that just wasn't as effective, especially considering the language barrier and my inexperience. It's common for overseas partners to tell you they can do whatever you ask, so it's important to learn the right kinds of questions—such as, are they going to outsource part of the work? I found the more they outsource, the longer things take, because you're at the mercy of other people's schedules. I also tended to trust what my partners told me, even when things didn't seem quite right. For example, when the software wasn't moving along fast enough, I got so many different explanations, and eventually had to give up and go back to China to expedite the project. The confusion pushed back the production time by almost six months, but luckily things worked out in the end despite the delays—they managed to pull off a pretty good design, and we have a low defect rate.

Don't marry yourself to your original design.

I put the original prototype together quickly using the materials I had at my disposal. I used shag carpeting to emphasize that Clocky had a living quality, but in a manufacturing context, it was more important to choose materials that

were durable and easy to work with. I tried to retain that living quality by arranging the buttons and LCD screen to mimic a face, but I succumbed to a sleek, plastic look so it could be available in different colors and appeal to people who might not like the shag. For those who miss it, we're planning on eventually making separate coverings to outfit the product.

If you're not prepared, keep new products close to the vest.

When the press contacted me, I had a prototype that was hooked up to an external circuit board, as if on life support. It wasn't made to run around a room; it needed very long wires. So I put my thesis on hold for a few weeks and focused on getting Clocky working. But I answered all the press requests, not really thinking that I should postpone some for later. I'm more careful now with how much I reveal and when—I'm keeping any new product ideas I have under wraps until we've finished development and have the proper patent protection.

Don't be afraid to share the work.

We're now at a transitional point where the company has become bigger than I can handle. But you can find a good fulfillment center to handle the customer service, as well as packaging and shipping. There's a lot you can outsource.

Build a product you actually need.

I prefer not to use an alarm clock at all, of course. But when I have to get up, I do use my Clocky.

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